

Queen of Clubs

Chapter 1 December 31st 1973

The countdown began as midnight drew closer.

“Ten, nine, eight ...”

The guests rose from their tables, flutes of champagne held high as the celebrity host led their raucous chant.

“Seven, six, five ...”

Emma stood in the shadows watching with quiet pride as her latest club, ‘Cassandra’s of Mayfair’, was officially launched. Over two hundred guests had assembled to welcome in 1974 with all the style, exuberance and extravagance associated with Emma’s establishments.

“Four, three, two, one.”

With an explosion of shimmering light and the crackle of pyrotechnics, the main venue was transformed. Gold and silver balloons rained down onto the now frenzied guests as they hugged each other and replenished their glasses. Then a piper struck up ‘Auld Lang Syne’ and the heaving mass formed into a fluid circle which ebbed and flowed like a restless tide across the floor as the more audacious party goers led charges towards the opposite flank. The inevitable collisions brought people tumbling to the ground but undaunted, the remaining party goers formed into a line which conga-ed haphazardly around the room until almost everyone had joined in the weaving procession.

Emma searched amongst the dancers for David. At this moment she needed a partner and his absence irritated her. The conga approached, led by a dishevelled young banker - a frequent guest. There were young aristocrats, some politicians, a smattering of actors and faces from the world of pop music. People came to Emma’s clubs because they were lavish, contemporary and discreet. Guests had to be invited to become members. As a result, Emma had been elevated to a society icon – somebody whose opinions mattered.

At fifty, Emma retained much of her youthful good looks and combined these with an air of authority and self-assurance which made her both respected and admired. She wore a simple tailored navy dress which set off an expensive diamond necklace worn above a discreet neckline.

“Not dancing?” came the sound of a familiar voice as an arm slipped around her waist and alcohol fumes wafted across her face.

“I was waiting for you. I thought my first dance of 1974 should be with my husband.”

There was a cautionary edge to her voice.

“Let’s join the tail of the conga.”

Laughing, they attached themselves to the gyrating column and were soon engulfed in the noisy celebrations.

At Hampton category C prison, midnight was celebrated with the customary banging on cell doors and the shouting of obscenities. Lester sat hunched on his bed grateful for the fact that this relatively new prison had individual cells. He didn't have to suffer the excruciating boredom of listening to some other tortured soul talking relentlessly about his troubled past or the indignity of having to defecate in front of him.

The cell doors had been locked at 9pm after a New Year's Eve meal of watery stew and a small portion of apple pie. He had arrived at Hampton six months previously after years spent in maximum security prisons. His original sentence of seven years had been extended to ten after he was involved in an attack on another prisoner.

He gazed at the featureless blue walls that formed the limits of his universe. By focusing on a particular spot for a while, shapes and pictures emerged – faces, buildings, landscapes – offering tantalising glimpses of an imagined world.

He suddenly tired of the game. Outside his door someone had been dragged from their cell and was screaming abuse at the guards. He pulled his knees up to his chin and put his hands over his ears. His mind drifted to Emma. He tried not to think about her too often. After he was jailed he'd vowed not to see her again. It was better for her and better for him. But it was now New Year's Day. He'd allow himself the indulgence of breaking his rule though he knew he would pay a price. His depression would return.

He uncurled his body and stretched out on the hard cot bed imagining her beside him as she had been so many times before. He felt the softness of her lips, the nakedness of her body and the passion that flowed through his veins when they made love. Then afterwards, the talking – her head on his chest, her legs wound around his. Confiding with another person in a way he'd never dared to before.

Where would she be now? Almost certainly at Cassandra's. The clubs were the one part of his former business empire that he had fought to save. The East End in which he'd grown up and learned his trade had gone and with it the protection, prostitution and gambling that had made him wealthy. But the clubs – they were different. They were legitimate and he was proud of their success.

For a while he had seemed unassailable, protected by those who enjoyed his hospitality. But his past had caught up with him. He had made enemies – people whose indiscretions made them vulnerable and who viewed him as a threat. When he intervened to help rescue Emma's stepson from a kidnap, he failed to see that he was walking into a trap. By confronting the boy's abductor and killing him, he was charged with murder – even though he had saved the boy's life. His legal team had the charges reduced to manslaughter but he was still gaoled for seven years.

Desperate not to lose the clubs, he had asked Emma to look after them for him and surrendered ownership to her. It turned out that Emma had been born for just such a job.

As Elton John's 'Crocodile Rock' boomed out across the heaving dance floor, David made his excuses and headed off to join a group of drinkers. Emma noticed how much weight he had now put on. After she had agreed to take on the clubs, it was decided that David would take control of Carters. Emma had tired of the aggressive testosterone fuelled world of construction and found her skills much more suited to the management of clubs and venues where her social skills and political antennae opened doors at the highest levels.

From across the room, she saw the imposing figure of Robert Halsworthy, Shadow Minister for Housing and Reconstruction. She watched, expectantly, as he made his excuses to a group of friends and wound his way through the throng of revellers towards her.

"Emma." He kissed her on the cheek, lingering tantalisingly close to her mouth.

"Let's go into the bar. It's too noisy to talk here."

He guided her into a quieter room with high backed soft chairs and chintz covered sofas. A small bar occupied one corner.

"What are you drinking?"

"No, let me," she offered.

A bar attendant arrived at her side.

"Scotch and soda for me."

"I'll have a gin and tonic."

"How was Christmas?"

"OK," he replied. Lots of family. A few arguments. The normal things."

He leant forward and cupped his hand to her ear.

"I've missed you," he whispered.

Ten years previously they had been lovers. Robert had just entered parliament in Harold Wilson's first government and there was heady expectation that change was in the air. Their affair was passionate but short lived as the realities of both their lives intervened. But recent events had brought them together again and their desire for each other had been re-ignited.

"Tonight," he said softly, holding her wrists tight and pulling her close.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"We're having a family day tomorrow. It's a bank holiday – remember?"

"Then when?"

“Soon, I promise. Now, tell me what’s going on in the backstabbing world of politics.”

Robert sat back, allowing the surge of passion within his body to dissipate.

“I suppose you know there’s going to be an election?”

“I hadn’t heard for definite.”

“It’s not official yet. But Heath can’t carry on. The miners are coming out on strike and there’s talk of a three day working week. The economy’s in recession and output has taken a dive. He’ll have no choice.”

“But the unions are out of control. How can Labour possibly win?”

“It’s going to be tough but the country wants a change. Harold Wilson’s the only one who can tame the unions. They trust him”

“And what about you? What will you be offered?”

“A new post I hope – science and technology. There’s a ministerial flat comes with the job.”

He raised his glass and smiled knowingly at Emma.

“Robert – where the hell have you been?” interrupted one of his parliamentary colleagues. “There’s someone I think you should meet.”

Suddenly his eyes caught Emma’s.

“Oh forgive me Mrs Malikov. I didn’t realise it was you.”

“It’s alright George” replied Robert. “Emma has her hands full. We’ll let her get on.”

He leant forward - his mouth close to her ear. She could feel his breath.

“I’ll call you soon.”

A shiver of excitement ran down her spine as he kissed her cheek and walked away.

Breakfast began at 6.30 in Hampton Prison. Lester joined the queue of inmates in the refectory as they waited patiently. He had learnt to keep his eyes lowered. Any unnecessary eye contact with another inmate could be misinterpreted. He was a loner – someone who didn’t identify with one of the many factions within the prison. This meant he was at risk. If someone picked a fight he had no-one to protect him.

It had been very different when he had first been incarcerated in Pentonville Prison in 1965. As a prominent gang leader in London’s East End, he commanded respect. His associates on the outside would exact vengeance on the family or friends of anyone within the austere Victorian walls who crossed Lester’s path. Prison officers soon learnt to treat him with caution.

But inside the confines of the bleak jail Lester lost touch with what was happening on the outside. Immigrant gangs were moving into his territory with drug dealing as their main source of income. A new criminal culture began to take over from the old replacing loyalty and respect with ethnic allegiance. Slowly his outside contacts faded away or were killed.

Lester found himself shuffling along the line of trestle tables that formed the serving area. A slice of fried bread landed on his plate with a metallic ping. It was immediately drowned in a tsunami of baked beans topped with a scoop of yellow mush masquerading as scrambled egg.

He found a seat at a table away from inmates he knew and scooped the food into his mouth with a single fork.

It had become clear that his influence was waning in Pentonville when other inmates began to taunt him. His normal seat in the canteen was taken and his plate was frequently knocked from his hands as he queued to be served. He decided that he must act to restore his position.

Using cigarettes and drugs as currency, he bought the help of two other inmates and planned his attack. His retribution had to be visible. He had to prove his status. His assistants had forewarned other gang leaders as prison etiquette required. They had also arranged for a diversion in the wing to provide Lester with his opportunity.

He selected as his target the inmate who had taken his seat in the dining room. Hodge was a gang member who specialised in extortion and retribution, often with extreme violence. Other inmates kept their distance from him.

On the appointed night in the autumn of 1967, a fight broke out at one end of the wing where the billiard tables were set up. The two duty guards rushed to the scene whilst a warning siren began to blast. Prisoners began to return to their cells – the normal procedure in the event of trouble.

As Hodge made his way back past Lester's cell with two lieutenants, Lester made his attack, brandishing a razor blade bound into the handle of a tooth brush. He had intended two or three slashes – a warning – nothing more. Hodge grabbed at the slash wounds across his face and howled like a wounded animal.

"Lay off me or I'll kill you – you asshole" shrieked Lester, his face contorted and crimson. "Cross me again and your kids will be mincemeat."

But Hodge, blood pouring from his face, stood his ground. Momentarily, Lester hesitated. It was enough to allow one of the lieutenants to knock the blade from his hand. He felt himself seized from behind just as Hodge's blood-soaked fists began to rain blows into his face. Through a red mist, Lester could just make out the faces of other prisoners watching – people he had counted on – people who were now turning their backs on him.

Lester slipped into unconsciousness as the punching and kicking continued. He learnt afterwards that the guards took ten minutes to respond. He had been betrayed and outwitted.

He spent three months in the prison hospital with broken ribs, two broken arms and extensive bruising. When he was released he was sent to a sex offender's prison for his own safety

to remove him from the gang culture of Pentonville and his sentence was increased to ten years. It was the point at which he gave up all hope.

“Miller!”

Lester looked up. It was one of the younger prison guards – probably in his mid-twenties. He looked nervous and his voice quivered as he tried to sound assertive.

“What?”

“When you’ve finished your breakfast, report to the Assistant Governor. She’s expecting you.”

Lester said nothing but drank noisily from his mug.

“Well?”

Lester belched and took another swig of tea.

A wintery sun trickled into Emma and David’s bedroom in their Romford house, casting shafts of dappled light across the Laura Ashley wallpaper. This was the home where Emma had settled in 1962 with Peter. Together they had worked hard to grow Carters Construction and win contracts to rebuild the east of London after the devastation of the war.

Emma lay awake in bed. David had his back turned to her, his snores sonorous and hypnotic.

The house had seen both tragedy and joy - tragedy when Peter died so unexpectedly just before Christmas in 1964. Joy – well that must have been when Michael returned from hospital, able to walk unaided for the first time. Michael was Peter’s son from his marriage to Emma’s half-sister Evie. Evie and Peter were first cousins though they didn’t know that when they became engaged. Michael was born with deformities that took many years of surgery to correct. And when he was eighteen a pioneering operation enabled him to walk. With his new mobility, he soon became fit and strong – this combined with his intellectual prowess gained from reading extensively whilst confined to bed, gave him a new confidence. He was destined to take over Carters Construction when he turned thirty, so fulfilling his father’s most cherished dream.

A loud snort followed by a yawn announced that David was re-joining the world.

“What time is it?” he asked. “God, am I late for work?”

“It’s a holiday – New Year’s Day. You don’t have to go to work.”

He looked puzzled as he absorbed the information. She lay closer to him, taking hold of his arm, wondering if he would take this opportunity for them to make love. It was six months since the last time.

“There’s no hurry. We can lie in. The twins won’t surface until after mid-day. Michael and Chantal are coming over for a late lunch. It’s a family day. We can just relax.”

“I need the toilet,” he responded blankly and climbed out of bed.

Emma lay alone thinking. The time after Peter’s death had been traumatic. She had taken control of the company and immediately been confronted by a strike. As a woman in a man’s world she found it very difficult to cope. Then a local businessman, who she later discovered was also a crime syndicate boss, offered her his help. Lester Miller was an old style villain. She liked to think of him as a bit of a Robin Hood. There was no doubt he extorted money from those who used his clubs and escort girls, but he also offered protection to the weak and needy in the East End of London. He used his influence to help settle the strike and win new contracts. Emma never enquired how he did this.

Lester arrived at the first locked gate which separated his wing from the outside world.

“Got to see the Assistant Governor,” he announced tersely to the guard.

“Wait here. I’ll get you an escort.”

He returned in a couple of minutes with a sour-faced officer. She looked at him with disdain but said nothing. The gate was unlocked and he walked through. Then the officer led him along featureless grey corridors and two more sets of locked gates until they reached the Assistant Governor’s office. The officer knocked on the door and pushed it open.

“Miller here to see you, Ma’am,” she said with the same disdain she’d used for him.

“Come in, Miller.” Lester walked in to be confronted by a young woman, possibly in her early thirties. She was one of the new breed of fast track university appointments – full of ideas and theories but seldom seen on the prison landings.

“Sit down. Tea?”

He watched as she boiled a kettle and placed tea bags in two mugs. A posy of small flowers sat in a jam-jar near the window - possibly a present from a child. Did she have a family? Did she go home in the evening and read bedtime stories - unlike the hard bitten career officers who sold their souls to the prison service?

“It’s my job, Miller, to keep track of inmates who are within sight of their release and plan a programme that prepares them for that day.”

She handed him the tea. It was piping hot.

“In two months you become eligible for parole.”

Lester was taken aback. He hadn’t expected this. He had thought they were going to move him again – hopefully away from all these sex offenders.

“Parole,” he repeated with a trembling voice. “I didn’t think I was eligible.”

“You’ve served extra time, Miller, and to be honest with you the Government is on at us to make room. If you can convince us that you’re not a threat, then we can try to get you out of here.”

For the first time in many years Lester felt a glimmer of hope. It was an unfamiliar and frightening feeling. He knew that it usually led to him being let down.

“What do I have to do?”

“Well, the first thing is that we need a reference – a sort of testimonial from a close friend or family member who is prepared to vouch for you. Have you got such a person?”

Lester scratched his head, thinking.

“I don’t have any family left. My old friends have mostly gone. This is going to be a tough one.”

“What about business associates? It says here that you used to run gaming clubs. Did you have a partner or business associate who could answer for you?”

Emma’s face came into his mind – the woman he had once loved and then lost. But he had told her it was over. She had married David and he hadn’t spoken to her for nearly nine years. She would have forgotten him – probably even hated him.

“There is one person. I could try asking.”

Emma had cooked a roast. She seldom prepared meals these days, there simply wasn’t time. She either ate with colleagues over business lunches or grabbed snacks as she dashed from one meeting to another. But today she had determined would be different. The twins, Robert and Julia, were at home – a rare occurrence. They were both in their first year at University and immersing themselves in a hedonistic student lifestyle. Robert’s hair was long and reached down to his shoulders. Julia had her blond hair tied into a pony tail. Both of them bantered with each other as Emma laid the table. David’s voice could be heard coming from the hall where he was conducting a heated business exchange with some unfortunate.

“I thought Mike would be here,” bellowed Robert from the dining room.

“He will be,” replied Emma. “I’m expecting him soon.”

“Is Chantal coming?” enquired Julia.

“Yes. They’re both coming.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“We must let bygones be bygones. Michael has made his choice and we must respect that.”

“I’ve never had any problem with Chantal anyway,” announced Robert reproachfully.

“I know you haven’t but you’re not fully aware of what happened,” replied Emma feeling suddenly flustered. “I’m still not sure she’s right for Michael.”

Chantal had been employed as an au pair by Emma back in 1965 – soon after Peter had died. She was a young French student and her presence in the house brought freshness and laughter after the devastation of Peter’s loss. Michael in particular adored her. By that time he was sixteen and able to walk on crutches. He had been reclusive and awkward. Her presence in the house gave him a new confidence and the opportunity for his first ‘crush’.

On his seventeenth birthday, Emma had allowed Chantal to take Michael out to dinner to help him feel more adult. Arrangements were carefully made so that his wheelchair could be accommodated. They drank champagne and after the meal Michael insisted that Chantal take him to a club. The evening ended in disaster with Chantal being charged with assault and both spending a few hours in a police station. Emma dismissed Chantal the following day.

“Why not?” Julia shouted from the dining room as Emma returned to the kitchen. “What haven’t you told us?”

“I got the impression there was something in her past – something she was trying to hide.”

“What sort of something?”

“I don’t know.”

“So you dismissed her,” retorted Robert in a faintly accusatory tone.

“I had to. I needed someone more responsible to look after Michael. Anyway he was about to go into hospital for six weeks – for the big operation.”

The big operation had been the turning point in Michael’s life – the attempt to secure his hip joints so that he could walk without a stick. Six weeks later he hobbled cautiously out of Great Ormond Street Hospital to begin a new life.

The doorbell chimed and the sound of greetings rang out as David answered the door. Michael entered first, his six foot frame and broad shoulders filling the entrance. Emma rushed forward to greet him, reaching up to throw her arms around his neck.

“Come on, Emma. It’s only been a week since you last saw me.”

Behind Michael came a slim dark haired girl. Her face was framed by a fringe with long hair tumbling down her back. She wore jeans tucked into knee length leather boots and smiled tentatively as she entered the room as if unsure of her welcome.

“Chantal, how lovely to see you,” cooed Emma kissing her lightly on both cheeks. “I’m so glad you could join us.”

After his operation, Michael made rapid progress. His intellectual ability gained him a place at St. Peter’s College, Oxford, where his social and athletic skills completed his transformation from reclusive invalid to the outgoing and confident man that he had become. In 1971, at the end of his time at Oxford, he set off across Europe to broaden his knowledge of language and cultures. But first

he made his way to Caen in Northern France. He knew it was Chantal's home town and he was determined to find her again as he'd carried guilt in his heart ever since her summary dismissal by Emma. What he discovered in Caen was deeply disturbing.

"Right, let's sit down everyone," commanded Emma. "David, can you begin carving? Michael, can you pour the wine please?"

As it was a public holiday, the cell doors at Hampton were locked at 1.30 in the afternoon to allow more prison guards to be with their families. Lester sat hunched on his bed listening to the deranged shouts of other inmates – a noise with which he was now very familiar. The cell doors wouldn't be opened again until seven in the morning – another seventeen and a half hours to wait. He picked up the blank pad of paper that lay by his side and fingered the ballpoint pen nervously. How would Emma react to receiving a letter from him? Did she ever think about him? Surely it would be better for her if he stayed in prison – out of the way.

"Darling Emma," he wrote. Then he screwed up the piece of paper and began again.

"Dear Emma."

He waited for inspiration but nothing came. He let his mind wander back to that last meeting in November 1965 when he had been sentenced.

"I've got seven years but I'll be out in five. It's all been arranged. Two years in a high security jail then three in cat C or open prison. I'll be OK."

"I'll wait for you," she had whispered.

"No, don't do that." He had tried to sound cold and disengaged. "I don't know what sort of man I'll be when I get out."

"I'll visit you."

"No, Emma. I won't let you."

As she left the heavily guarded room, he felt numb. The truth was he didn't know whether he could survive five years in jail. If it was discovered that he'd co-operated with the police to get a reduced sentence, he would be punished by other inmates. They said that more than five years in jail changed a man – broke him so that he was unrecognisable. He didn't want Emma to have to deal with that.

David carved the beef in the kitchen and brought it ready plated into the dining room. Glasses were filled and a toast proposed.

"To our family!" said Emma. And as an afterthought, "our dynasty."

"Dynasty!" exclaimed Robert. "That's a bit pretentious."

“Not at all,” replied Emma. “I think we should be proud of what we’ve achieved. When you think that in fifty years we’ve come from poor old Jed wheeling his cart around the streets of Frampton to Carters Construction being involved in one of the biggest building projects in the country, I think we have reason to be proud of ourselves. I would just like to think that you young people will pick up the baton and carry on.”

Her eyes moved to Michael as she said this. He shifted in his chair.

“Heading up a dynasty is not everyone’s ‘cup of tea’,” he responded.

“I don’t see why not. We provide people with jobs and incomes. We build homes and hospitals. Aren’t you proud of that?”

“Of course I am. But I’m talking about the bigger picture.”

“What bigger picture?”

“We’re part of a system that exploits people. We control their lives”

“Well they don’t have to work for us. They can go else-where,” replied Emma indignantly.

“But everywhere else is just the same. It’s the system that’s wrong.”

“Is this what they’re filling your head with at university?”

“They’re teaching us to think the unthinkable - yes.”

“And what is the unthinkable?” asked David looking up from his plate.

“It’s about changing everything, starting from the beginning,” interrupted Chantal in her heavily accented voice. “We have seen what the past did. It brought terrible destruction. I myself was brought up in the rubble of war. I saw the misery. There must be a better way – even if we have to fight for it.”

“Isn’t that a kind of contradiction?” suggested Emma.

“I only meant that we mustn’t be frightened of change,” replied Chantal, lowering her eyes to avoid the gaze of those around the table.

“It seems to me the present system works well,” responded David. “You have to reward hard work and investment. That’s what makes our economy grow. If that means some people are rich and some are poor – then that’s simply how life is.”

“How can you possibly say that?” challenged Julia, banging her cutlery down onto her plate with a crash. “There are people living in poverty in this country through no fault of their own. I see people sleeping in shop doorways and begging in the street whilst people like us live in luxury. And you say the system’s not broke.”

“Alright, alright,” interrupted Emma. “We’re meant to be having a pleasant family lunch. Can we talk about something else please?”

Lester put the pencil down and studied the sheet of paper in front of him. It was two o'clock in the morning. It had taken him ten hours to produce this heavily edited letter.

'Dear Emma. It's a long time since we last met and I want to thank you for respecting my wishes by not getting in touch. You will have heard that my sentence was extended and my time in prison has been tougher than I thought. Now, however, I have been told that I might be eligible for parole. For this to happen, someone needs act as a guarantor – someone who is respected and credible. You are the only person I know who the authorities might trust.

I want to assure you that my feelings for you, which were once so intense, will not get in the way. I know that you have made a new life with David and I would not want to jeopardise that. But if you would agree to act as my guarantor, at least I might have the chance of a life too. Please write to me and let me know. Lester.'

It seemed somehow cold – too precise. He wanted to express his feelings – to let her know how much he yearned for her – how he thought about her every day – but he didn't have the words.

As they sat in bed together, Emma felt a strange awkwardness. She and David seldom slept in the same bed these days. They had bought a small flat in a new development close to the big Docklands redevelopment project of which Carters Construction was a key contractor. David worked long days and the flat enabled him to be close to the construction site. In fact, Emma had good reason to believe that he didn't spend his time there alone. She had noticed the tell-tale signs – a certain mental absence when they were talking - as if his mind was somewhere else. Fastidious attention to grooming. The appearance of a male scent in his travel bag.

"How do you think it went today?" she asked.

A grunt surfaced from behind the book that David was reading. Emma pulled it angrily away.

"I'm talking to you. I asked you what you thought of today. I meant Michael. The idea has always been that he will inherit the company but his head seems to be filled with radical political notions."

"He's still young," replied David with a yawn. "Only twenty-five. It's good that he's asking questions."

"It's just that when he won his place at Oxford I was so overjoyed – after all those terrible years growing up. Suddenly, he was a healthy intelligent young man. I could hardly believe the transformation. Then when he wanted to go off travelling – that seemed fine too. It was natural for him to stretch his wings. What I didn't expect was that he would return with her."

"Why are you so against Chantal?"

"I just don't think she's being honest with us. I think there are things in her past."

"What sort of things?"

“I don’t know. Perhaps we should find out.”

David took refuge again behind his book and Emma’s thoughts drifted back to the strange series of events that had brought her from abject poverty in the United States to head up a construction company and a chain of celebrity clubs in the UK. Sometimes she struggled to recognise the person she had been and more worryingly she struggled to recognise the person she had become.

“What are your plans for this week?” asked David as he reached the end of a chapter and threw his book onto the floor.

“Well, don’t forget that I’m going to the States on Friday. I’m meeting potential investors.”

“Of course you are. I hadn’t forgotten. I’ll try to be back on Thursday night before you go.”

That gives you two nights to sleep with your secretary, Emma thought to herself as David turned off his bedside light and heaved the bedclothes over to his side.

It also gave her two nights to see Robert. She would call him tomorrow. As she switched off her light and turned away from David she felt a brief ripple of expectant pleasure.

Chapter 2

The following days were busy as Emma prepared for her trip to New York. She booked a late flight from Heathrow on one of BOAC’s new Boeing 747s. It would be a nostalgic trip as BOAC was due to merge with British European Airways at the end of March. Many travellers feared that the long tradition of being pampered by elegant stewardesses and served exquisite on board meals would soon be lost.

Early on Tuesday morning, Emma received a call from Robert Halsworthy. He sounded excited and breathless.

“It’s about to happen Emma. The miners are going back on strike and Heath has announced the Government’s imposing a three day working week to conserve fuel stocks.”

“He can’t do that,” she heard herself wailing. “How will we meet our deadlines? We’ll be in breach of contract.”

“It’s the same for everyone. We don’t see how Heath can survive. He’s going to have to call an election.”

“When?”

“Soon. This is our chance to get back into power.”

He delivered the news with breathless excitement.

“Let’s meet, Emma.”

“I can’t. I’m going to the States on Friday – after that perhaps. ”

“Tonight,” he said emphatically. “I’ll book the Glenmoran. Say yes.”

She knew that David would be staying in the London flat and the thought of another evening at home by herself was not appealing.

“I’ll see you there at eight.”

She put the phone down feeling weak at the thought of rekindling her affair with Robert. She relished the excitement and passion but knew there would be an emotional toll.

As she continued preparing for her trip, she switched on the radio to listen to the latest news bulletin. The impending miners’ strike and the three day week dominated. The miners’ union was becoming increasingly militant and troops were being called in to help move coal from pit heads to power stations as the possibility of fuel shortages threatened to plunge the country into darkness.

As the political argument and counter argument began to ebb and flow across the airwaves, Emma found herself thinking again about an idea that had been forming in her mind for a while. After her business in New York was finished, she was due to return to the UK. Instead, she was considering flying down to Jackson in Mississippi and travelling to the township where she had lived with her first husband, Samuel. She had arrived there in 1946, already engaged to be married. She and Samuel had met when he was stationed in Norfolk during the war. Their love was intense and free of any racial preconceptions. When the war was over, Samuel returned to the US with his unit and Emma joined the hundreds of thousands of other young British women on chartered ‘GI bride ships’ seeking a new life with their American lovers. But when Emma arrived in America, Samuel was not there to meet her and she had to travel on to Jackson alone. When she eventually tracked him down, she discovered that he believed the whole idea had been just a dream. ‘White women didn’t come all the way to the United States to marry black men.’ And the stories he had told her about being received back as a hero after the war were patently wrong. He lived in a corrugated iron shed in a mosquito infested swamp with his brother, his sister and her family. A few other black families lived close by.

The sound of a news announcement on the radio jolted her out of her thoughts.

There are growing calls in the United States for the President, Richard Nixon, to face an impeachment trial for his involvement in the Watergate scandal. This involves the alleged burglary and illegal wiretapping of the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate complex by members of President Richard Nixon's re-election committee and subsequent attempts to hinder the investigation. President Nixon continues to deny all involvement.

Emma felt a shiver run down her spine as the implications of what she had heard sunk in. After the war, the United States had seemed like a beacon of civilisation compared with the brutality and destruction that had engulfed Europe. When Emma arrived she had been filled with hope for a better future. But as her rickety bus made its way from Jackson to Barret’s Creek on that fateful day, the reality began to dawn – black people segregated from whites on the buses; race riots as black

children tried to take up their allocated places in white schools; poverty amongst black people evident on every street corner.

For Emma there was no turning back. There was nothing left for her in the UK so she decided to marry Samuel and make her life with him in his community.

The news had finished and the radio was blaring out 'You'll never find another fool like me' by the New Seekers. The lyrics seemed prophetic.

In the sweltering heat of southern Mississippi and in the face of daily discrimination, Emma watched Samuel decline from the self-assured and positive airman she had fallen in love with in Britain to a surly and withdrawn outcast. He became prey for the gangs that operated in the outback slums. He disappeared for long periods and refused to tell Emma where he had gone or what he was doing.

"I'm just doin' my business and it aint nothin' to do with you," was all she could get out of him.

For a while she sought consolation with Samuel's family. They were kind but they had nothing to give. For months she shared in their poverty, eating scraps and helping with the daily grind of chores. She doubted if it was possible to descend any further into the pit of misery in which she found herself. Outside of this family, Emma was viewed with suspicion by other black families who couldn't understand why she was living amongst them and she was treated with outright hostility by whites who saw her as a traitor to their belief in white supremacy.

The sound of a letter dropping onto the mat drew her attention. Leaving the packing, she walked into the hall and picked up an envelope. It was addressed to her. On the back it had the logo 'HM Prison Hampton.' She felt her heart jump. She knew exactly who the letter was from. Steadying herself, she made her way into the kitchen and poured a coffee. After she had taken the first sips she tore open the envelope and unfolded the letter. She recognised the small formal writing immediately. Her hand began to shake.

Dear Emma. It's a long time since we last met and I want to thank you for respecting my wishes by not getting in touch. You will have heard that my sentence was extended and my time in prison has been tougher than I thought.

She'd heard that he had been beaten. She desperately wanted to see him but David had advised caution. He argued that to suddenly reappear in his life would only cause him confusion and further misery. It was better to respect the agreement they had reached – to remain out of contact.

I have been told that I might be eligible for parole. For this to happen, someone needs act as a guarantor – someone who is respected and credible. You are the only person I know who the authorities might trust.

The idea of Lester being freed made her nervous. Memories of their love affair had been pushed into deep recesses. Fears that he might want to take back control of the clubs bubbled to the surface. Her life was ordered and in control. Yet his letter told of a deep unhappiness which it was within her grasp to end.

I want to assure you that my feelings for you, which were once so intense, will not get in the way. I know that you have made a new life with David and I would not want to jeopardise that but if you would agree to act as my guarantor, at least I might have the chance of a life too. Please write to me and let me know. Lester.

Emma folded the letter and placed it in her desk, knowing that David would never find it there. She would need to discuss it with him but would need to choose her time carefully.

As she completed her packing, the image of Barret's Creek came into her mind again – fetid, hot and desolate - like a form of living purgatory. She had escaped but a part of her still remained there with the forsaken souls who lived every day in the hope of redemption. By returning there she hoped that she could rediscover her true self instead of living in the shadow of the woman she had become.

In the Student Union bar at the London School of Economics, Michael joined a large and noisy throng of other students at lunchtime. Under the stewardship of the renowned German sociologist, Ralph Dahrendorf, LSE had become a centre for radical thought and debate. In the extensive student premises situated in Houghton Street just off the Aldwych, the lunch period had become a frenetic occasion to meet friends, join societies, heckle speakers or simply drink in the charged atmosphere of belligerent youth.

An extensive bar at one end of the premises dispatched endless cheap pints of Watney's Red Barrel whilst a food counter at the other end of the room served a choice of 'today's special' or cellophane wrapped sandwiches. In between were rows of plastic-covered chairs and benches on which students sat, lay or were propped.

Around the periphery of the room were tables manned by groups promoting particular agendas. The Militant Tendency, a new radical Marxist group, was looking for volunteers to help fight local elections in Liverpool. The magazine 'Red Weekly', the mouthpiece of the International Marxists, was being sold from another table. But most attention was focused on a group from Coventry who were setting up a workers' co-operative to save their motorcycle factory and were asking for student support. They called their operation 'Meriden Motorcycles'.

Michael felt a big kiss on the side of his mouth and turned round to find Chantal beaming by his side. He embraced her and she sat across his lap, draping her arm around his neck.

"Had a good morning?" he asked, offering her a bite of his ham roll.

"OK, but my feet are dead," she replied with a marked French accent. "I am meant to be manager of that place but I spend all my time clearing up."

Chantal had taken temporary work in a restaurant when she and Michael had returned to London in 1972.

"How about you? You had a tutorial this morning."

"International Politics. It was OK. As usual the Marxists seized control."

"I thought you were a Marxist," she mumbled with a mouth crammed full of bread.

"I'm sympathetic, you know that. But I don't go along with all that stuff about a global capitalist conspiracy."

He saw her frown and felt uneasy. When he had gone to Caen in 1971 at the end of his final year at Oxford University, he had hoped to find her and apologise for the way she had been treated as an au pair. During the months that Chantal cared for him they became close friends and she helped him through his periods of depression. On his seventeenth birthday she slipped into his bed and he experienced his first faltering sexual awakening.

"What's going on over there?" asked Chantal, pointing to the growing crowd of students gathering around the Meriden workers.

"They're from a motorcycle factory in Coventry. Their plant is threatened with closure and they want to save it by forming a workers' co-operative."

He saw her eyes light up.

"Let's go and find out," she said – pulling him up from the bench.

When Michael arrived in Caen, he found himself in a city that had been virtually rebuilt since the Second World War. He had plenty of time to ponder the irony of a city rescued from German invaders by British troops but razed to the ground in the process. He had often asked Chantal if she held a grudge against the British for doing this but she simply shrugged her shoulders and replied that it was better to be free.

After days of searching he was put in touch with a young man who claimed to be Chantal's cousin and, for a price, gave Michael an account of what had happened to her. He told him that prior to coming to England in 1965, she had been involved with a violent student group which was active in France and Germany. The group was linked to The Red Army Faction which had already carried out a number of murders in protest against what they saw as the reinstatement of the old guard in Europe. Chantal was not involved in the violence but came to England to escape possible prosecution. After she was sacked by Emma, she returned to France believing she would be dealt with leniently. But Michael discovered with growing alarm that the Government had set out to make an example of anyone associated with the group and she was sentenced to five years in prison for sedition. She was due for release in July 1971, exactly the time Michael was there.

As Michael stood in the square opposite the prison entrance in Caen one morning at seven thirty, he had no idea how she would react to his presence. When the gates opened, he recognised her immediately – but not the smiling, long haired carefree girl he had known. This was a scared looking young woman with a furrowed brow and hair cut short against her head.

When he called out he saw the fear in her eyes. She didn't recognise him. The last time she had seen him he was a scrawny and crippled boy. Now he was tall and strong. She broke down and he just managed to catch her as she collapsed to the cobbled ground.

A crowd of students were gathered round two men and a woman who stood holding placards which proclaimed 'Save Meriden Motorcycles – support the worker's co-operative.' One of the Meriden workers was explaining their campaign.

"We used to be Triumph Motorcycles – a proud British name making bikes that were sold round the world. But management didn't invest and the Japanese started to overtake us. They blamed it on the workforce. Said our productivity was poor. But we know that's not right. It's management that's let the workforce down."

There was a cheer of support from the student audience.

"Then we were sold. No thought for the lives of the workers or their families. The new management told us it was going to close our factory with the loss of three thousand jobs. So we took a stand. We said no."

Howls of delight from the students.

"Now we plan to start a workers' co-operative and begin production again. We'll run our own plant. We don't need management."

Michael turned to watch Chantal who was shouting in agreement, her eyes alight with fervour. Her face was animated and beautiful.

After he met her in the square outside the prison, he took her back to his hotel. The days that followed were difficult. Chantal was in a black mood and resisted any suggestion that they had a future together. On the third day after her release he managed to persuade her to go with him to the old Citadel that overlooks Caen. There, in the afternoon sunshine with the rebuilt city stretching out before them, he tried to convince her that from desecration and misery, new life and new hope could emerge. Later that evening they collected their belongings from the hotel and took the train to Paris. That night they boarded the overnight sleeper from Gare de Lyon and headed south.

"We need your support," continued the speaker from Meriden. "You took to the streets in 1968 and we need you to do the same for us now. Workers and students united."

A roar of approval greeted these sentiments.

"The first thing is to get this bloody Conservative government out. They're set against the workers. Look what they're doing to the miners. There are people in the Labour party who'll support us. Tony Benn, Shadow Technology Minister, is one of them. In fact, he'll be addressing us next week outside the factory gates. You're all welcome to attend. After the speeches there'll be a march and a bit of a barbeque."

He ended with a flourish.

"Join us in solidarity brothers and sisters. Together we can get rid of the privileged few and make this a country fit for the many."

“Let’s go, Michael,” urged Chantal clutching his arm. “This is exciting - workers finally taking control.”

As the train headed south overnight on its way to the Mediterranean, the stress and tension seemed to drain away from Chantal. Michael asked her to join him on his travels and she agreed. They became lovers in the early morning, rocked by the hypnotic sound of the train as it headed south. The next day they arrived in Avignon and travelled to Marseille where they caught a ferry for Sardinia. In the peace and tranquillity of that idyllic island, their relationship blossomed. Chantal saw for the first time what a great communicator Michael had become. In the shade of many little bars and cafes situated by the glistening waters of the Mediterranean, Michael would argue enthusiastically with anyone who cared to pass the time of day with him and hardly an encounter passed without new friendships being formed.

The coffee shop was Italian and brought back memories of those halcyon days in Sardinia. Sliding into an alcove they ordered pasta and espresso coffee.

“So what do you think – next Saturday. Shall we go?” asked Chantal with anticipation.

“I don’t see why not,” replied Michael. “I’d like to find out more about this worker’s co-operative and I’d like to hear Tony Benn speak.”

“Who is this Tony Benn?”

He’s a Labour member of parliament but he was born into an aristocratic family. He fought to give up his right to a peerage so that he could enter parliament. He’s on the left of the party - quite radical.”

“Let’s go Michael – please.”

Michael smiled to see the enthusiasm written across her face.

“Why not?”

Chantal leant across the table and kissed him fully on the mouth.